

EVANGELIZATION
OF
VIETNAMESE BUDDHIST REFUGEES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this project is to formulate a Biblical strategy for the evangelization of the Vietnamese Buddhist Refugees.

The author started with an examination of the historical background and end results of the Protestant work in Vietnam since its inception. He then proceeded to study different aspects of religious, cultural and socio-economical situations of the Vietnamese Buddhist refugees both in the past and present in the United States. The Buddhist influences on the thought world, the people's way of life, their beliefs and traditions are surveyed to prepare an contextual frame of reference.

The form and content of evangelism is Biblically defined and through the parallel experience of suffering as a nation an applicable Biblical approach is formulated. The common ground of experience reality in suffering made it possible to focus on the Old Testament concept of Suffering Servant as guideline. The Biblical message of hope and salvation can become a reality to this group of suffering refugees as faith inspires and nourishes salvation both for individuals and for the nation.

The project for Evangelization of the Vietnamese Buddhist Refugees is then formulated on that premise. Dialogue, infiltration, hospitality and celebration of life are cardinal notion which practical details are developed in

the proposed approach to reach the Vietnamese Buddhist
Refugees with the Good News.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Dr. John S. Mbiti, Director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland, once told a story about a new Ph.D. who came home from abroad after ten years of study. With a theological degree in his hand, he earned the respect of the people in the village. They considered him to be a person who could do everything, especially in the spiritual sphere. One day, his sister was possessed by a demon. The villagers waited to see him cast it out, but he could not. Expectation from the villagers put so much pressure on him that he had to look for a solution. After hours of desperately searching through his pile of books, he found out that demon possession in the New Testament was already demythologized by Bultmann.

What good is the Gospel to the people if it is not applicable to their own context, and thus fails to meet their needs ? How can it be Good News if it fails against the "bad news" in the people's circumstances ? Although the content of the Good News remains unchanged, the context is always different from one country, region, village... to the others.

As a native of Uganda, Dr. Mbiti raises the challenge :

...could one recommend that some of you spend a month studying theology in a small cabin where the only light is from a small hurricane lamp ? You could try to write dissertations on some realities which we face, such as

how to present the gospel to a man who is reduced by hunger, disease and poverty, to the state of a bamboo skeleton... 1

It has been so long since Protestantism came to Vietnam that evangelization has been taken out of context. Christianity, and particularly Protestantism has been looked at as an imported American religion. The missionaries have taken a position of Christ-against-culture which has been assessed by Richard Niebhur. This position uncompromisingly affirms the sole authority of Christ over the Christian and totally denies the validity of culture. From this position, culture is often identified as the world, the cosmos which is dominated by the power of evil: the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes and the pride of life. For that reason, the missionaries have shown little concern about the positive values of the cultural tradition of the people, and the conversion of the heathen was made as if their culture was wholly corrupt. Therefore, Christ has become an intruder and destroyer, rather than a savior or a redeemer. Thus, the Good News has not been good news.

Today, the situation has somewhat changed. At least theoretically, culture has been discussed and considered more positively. As Charles H. Kraft writes:

Culture is not in and of itself either an enemy or a friend to God or humans. It is, rather, something that is there to be used by personal beings such as humans, God, or Satan. Culture is the milieu in which all encounters with or between human beings take place and in terms of which all human understanding and maturation occur. The human psyche is structured by culture, as is every expression of groupness, including family,

community, and church. 3

Contextualization is thus very crucial to the matter of evangelization. Shoky Coe in his paper, "Contextualizing Theology," has aptly pointed out:

Contextuality, therefore, I believe, is that critical assessment of what makes the context really significant in the light of the Missio-Dei. It is the missiological discernment of the signs of the times, seeing where God is at work and calling us to participate. 4

Just a few centuries after the birth of Vietnam, Buddhism, as well as other Chinese philosophies and religions, such as Confucianism and Taoism, were already introduced into the land. Since that time, they all have heavily influenced Vietnamese culture. Of these three influences, Buddhism has become dominant because it won the favor of several kings and royal families, and had the flexibility needed to appeal to the common people, whereas other philosophies could be appreciated only by highly educated scholars.

Today eighty percent of the Vietnamese population is Buddhist or somewhat influenced by Buddhism. There are no statistics to confirm this claim, but all Vietnamese historians agree that the majority of the people are Buddhists and that Buddhism has had a great influence on the customs and traditions of the Vietnamese people. In my conversations with several Christians who were formerly Buddhists, I found that they all shared the painful feeling of betraying the family tradition, a guilty feeling of being

ungrateful sons or daughters. There are others who refused to become Christians because they couldn't cope with such a feeling. In some cases, they even allowed their children to join the church, while they themselves refused to do so.

After more than three centuries of Catholicism and almost one century of Protestantism, the number of Christians is less than ten percent of the whole population, and the number of Protestants is only one-half of one percent. Among the refugees, this number has shown an increase, but the change is not large.

The question then arises whether the Vietnamese people, especially the refugees, need the Good News? My answer is affirmative, since all the refugees who have been suffering and in despair certainly need the Good News. But with the heavily Buddhist background, can the Gospel be really taken to heart so that they can turn their faith to Christ? Past experience has shown little success in reaching them. The question now is whether the church can learn from the past and find a more effective approach.

The Vietnamese refugees, largely Buddhists, have faced a lot of crises. While trying to escape, they have experienced rape, torture, and an uncertain future. Their traditional religion could not help them in time of need and give them healing power and hope. My thesis is that, if the people are properly evangelized, the Gospel will, indeed, offer an alternative for their recovery of meaning and hope

in life.

In this project, I will discuss the rediscovered meaning of evangelization in Chapter II. Chapter III is devoted to research on the situation of the Vietnamese Buddhist refugees. Chapter IV will survey how Buddhism has influenced the Vietnamese people and what it has done for refugees in times of crisis. Chapter V will contrast it with Christianity in a dialogue approach to see how Christianity can provide an alternative. In chapter VI, I will propose ways by which the church can effectively evangelize these people.

Limitations: Although I have done some research on Buddhism in general, this project deals only with Vietnamese Buddhism and how it influences the people of Vietnam. Particular emphasis is placed on how it affects the Vietnamese Buddhist refugees at present. The thirty-year war in Vietnam has produced seven million refugees. I will focus only on the refugees who have fled to the United States since 1975 -- nearly one million strong.

Christianity will be discussed from the perspective of my main concern, which is evangelism.

There are several works on evangelism and others on Buddhism, but little has been done on dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism in the Vietnamese context. Therefore, I will rely primarily on personal interviews and surveys.

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Harper & Row, 1951) pp. 45-65

3
Shoky Coe "Contextualizing Theology", in Mission Trends
No.2, p. 21

4
Charles H. Kraft, Christianity in Culture (New York:
Orbis Books, 1979) p. 113

5
When Vietnamese Buddhists were persecuted by Ngo Dinh
Diem's Regime in 1963, they claimed that 80% of the Buddhists
made up of 80% of the Vietnamese population. Also see Anh
Toan, Tin Nguong Vietnam V.1 , (Harrisburgh: Xuan-Thu, 1982)
p.276

Chapter II

THE MEANING OF EVANGELISM

During the ministry of Jesus, He called people into God's Kingdom and sent His disciples with the words: "As the Father has sent Me, even so I send you" (John 20:21). In obedience to this commission, His disciples went out into villages, cities, houses, out into the fields to heal the sick, cast out demons and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God. After the time they spent with Jesus: walking, eating, and sleeping with Him and following His teachings they faced a time of great doubt, a time of total despair, the time of Jesus' execution on the cross. They fled from Him. They deserted Him! But then came the triumphant moment when Jesus rose from death. The disciples were personal witnesses of the risen Christ (I John 1:2-3). As such, they were sent -- commissioned apostles to the world -- on the basis of their testimony, which is preserved in the New Testament and in the life of the church. The church is unique in its apostolic nature in the method of its commission. God in Christ has equipped the church with all gifts of the Holy Spirit necessary for its witness, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you shall be my witness in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the world" (Acts 1:8).

From that time on evangelization has been a task of

the church and of individual Christians. From Jesus, the first evangelizer, the church, the community of believers,¹ has become the evangelizing community.

In the course of its history, the church has experienced, many times, the loss and rediscovery of the meaning of evangelism. In the twentieth century, since the organization of the World Missionary Movement at Edinburgh in 1910, the church has been engaged in theological discussions about the nature, basis and meaning of mission. This discussion has been especially lively since 1948. These activities have generated new insights and developments² within churches and the ecumenical movement.

In the Evangelical camp, the issues of evangelism were discussed at the World Congress on Evangelism in Berlin in 1966, The International Congress on World Evangelization in Lausanne in 1974, and the Consultation on World Evangelization in Pattaya in 1980. The Ecumenical Movement held conferences on Renewal in Mission in Uppsala in 1968; Salvation Today in Bangkok in 1973; Holistic Mission in Nairobi in 1975; and The Kingdom Perspective in Melbourne in 1980. The Catholics have also engaged in several efforts at doing theology on evangelism. The Roman Synod in 1974, and³ Evangelii Nuntiandi in 1976, showed that concern.

Whatever the theological basis might be, these conferences have been wrestling with the questions: What is evangelization? What is the Good News? These are questions

which need to be answered before the church can rightly act.

What is evangelization?

The word "evangelization" is derived from the Greek word "euangelizomai", which means to bring or to announce the "euangelion", the good news. Once or twice, in the New Testament, it is used of secular news items, as when Timothy brought Paul the good news of the Thessalonians' faith and love (I Thess. 3:6) and when the angel Gabriel told Zechariah the good news that his wife, Elizabeth was to have a son (Luke 1:19).⁴ For the most part, the use of the verb relates to the Christian good news.

The word "evangelist", the one who evangelizes, or "euangelistes" in Greek, is used three times. Philip is referred to as evangelist (Acts 21:8), Paul mentions different gifts in the church, and evangelist is one of those (Ephesian 3:11). He encourages the young pastor, Timothy,⁵ to do the work of an evangelist.

Afred C. Krass said that in evangelism we are called to invite people to participate in the present reality, to respond to God's present working as well as to His past acts and to hope for the fulfillment of this present history in the future. Biblical evangelism calls people to active repentance and faith, calling them into solidarity with a community which recognizes its commission to participate in God's present activity as He creates history.⁶

In the New Testament, two other words are also used for "bringing the Good News". One is "Kerussein" (to proclaim) and the other is "marturein" (to bear witness). The word "Kerussein" occurs rather frequently in Mark (14 times), Luke (9 times), Acts (12 times) and in Paul's writings (17 times). Evangelization in the early church is expressed mostly by using this term, referring to "preaching⁷ the Good News".

Evangelization was later developed in strict relation to the life of fellowship and love in the church. The words "euangelizomai" and "euangelion", as well as "kerussein," do not occur, at all, in the writings of John. Witnessing comes to the fore, in view of the life of fellowship with the Father and with the Son and between all the members of the community (I John 1:1-4). Along with the "oral proclamation" of the Gospel, witnessing was also emphasized. The Christian community, as presented in the Acts of the Apostles and St. Paul's writings, is a community of fellowship. St. Paul emphasized it especially in connection with Eucharistic fellowship (I Cor.10:16f). "Koinonia" becomes a favorite term to describe the living bond existing in the church. To be a Christian is to have fellowship with God, the Father, and with the Son in the Spirit (I John 1:3-6). It also issues in the brotherly fellowship of the believers (I John 1:3-7). This doesn't suppress the "kerussein", but enriches it. The missionary proclamation or evangelization

takes place through preaching substantiated by life. The right Christian life urges one to share it with others and this sharing takes place in words and deeds. Thus, real evangelization as it was done by Christ, through words and deeds -- his whole life (Matthew 9:25) -- is continued by himself in his church through his Spirit.⁸

Therefore, evangelization is a life challenging task. It is costly and vulnerable. The word, "witness," derived from the Greek word, "marturia," and the violent death that many Christians faced gives the word "martyr" its present meaning -- "one who is tortured and put to death for his or her own belief".⁹ From the days of the apostles to today, in many parts of the world, to be a Christian has meant to be ready to endure physical and psychological violence. To be a martyr is to witness to the Gospel, as is reflected by the Latin American Christians from their own experience:

Authentic evangelism will not be achieved without paying a high price... What price did Jesus pay for evangelizing? What price did the apostles pay? Do we believe that we shall pay a cheap circulation of the Gospel? Evangelism will require that we pay in sacrifice, painful charge and radical options. In particular, an option in favour of the oppressed, rejecting temptation of false neutrality or open alliance with oppressive powers. There is no evangelism without a cross. Matt 10, Mark 8:31-38; John 15-16:4. 10

What is the Good News?

The meaning of evangelization cannot be fully understood without knowing what the good news really is.

John R.W. Stott is right when he says that evangelism may and

must be defined only in terms of the message, not of its
¹¹
 results or its methods.

The Gospel, or Good News, from the Greek word "euangelion," (meaning "joyous news or announcement"), is
¹²
 translated into English as "evangel." The word can hardly mean some body of doctrine served up like cold mashed potatoes. Nor can evangelization be done to keep the church rolls from showing a decrease in membership. The Gospel is joyous news that is spontaneously sloshed over everybody. "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Truly, this is what the early Christians experienced, and they shouted for joy. They shared the Good News as it was, and they invited others to receive, but it was up to the people to decide whether they wanted to participate.

But what made this news so good that the early Christians could hardly keep their mouths shut?

1. The problem. Sin is the central problem of humankind. Sin can be an act that departs from righteousness and from the righteous God. It can also be a quality opposed to truth and the God of truth. It was God who created the world and made it good. In the story of the fall, in Genesis 3, it was humankind who spoiled it.

Robert T. Henderson, in his book, Joy to the World, mentioned three types of sin: (1) personal sin, transgression by individuals, (2) interpersonal sin, transgression by a group of people within a community, (3) and systematic sin,

systems that oppress people and so violate the purpose of
¹³ God. God is really angry, because He is a righteous and holy
 God, He cannot tolerate sin. Thus sin alienates humankind
 from God, as well as separating each one from one's self.
¹⁴ Sin is injustice, unbelief.

2.- The Good News. God's good news is Jesus. He is the
 heart and soul of the Gospel. The Gospel is the Good News of
 God's merciful action for salvation of the world. The Gospel
 must be understood in the light of its Old Testament
 heritage. The God who sends the Good News is the same God
 who, in the Old Testament is revealed as Israel's Creator and
 Redeemer (Isaiah 43:14-15) -- the One who freed Israel from
 Pharaoh's hand and made them a holy people in order to give
 light to the nations, open the eyes of the blind, and set the
 captives free (Isaiah 42:6-7). In Israel's liberation, the
 pattern is established for the re-creation of humanity. It
 confirms Abraham's inheritance and the historical calling of
 his descendants. Abraham's call is seen to be God's answer
 to the chaos of nations (Genesis 12:1-2). In its experience
 of salvation, Israel discovers God, the creator. Thus the
 Old Testament views creation from the perspective of
 redemption (cf. Psalms 74,89,93,95,135,136; Isaiah 44:24;
 Amos 4:12, 5:8f, 10:16, 27:5, 32:17; Malachi 2:10). It is
 the beginning of a great eschatological scheme -- the Kingdom
 of God. Sin is the great disorder that tries to frustrate
 the work of God. Salvation is the re-creation that overcomes

sin and regains control of God's great plan.

St. Luke traces it back to the occasion in Jesus' own home synagogue in Nazareth when Jesus read the lesson from Isaiah 61 "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". Jesus closed the book and astonished his hearers by calmly informing them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:21). The passage in Isaiah was highly significant. It refers to the return of exile, and the messenger, anointed with God's own Spirit, announces God's signal victory, his kingly rule.

The resurrection came as God's vindication of the claims Jesus had made. From the one who came preaching the Good News he became the Good News, himself. The earliest Christians proclaimed the Good News of peace through Jesus, of the Lordship of Jesus, of the cross of Jesus, of the resurrection of Jesus or simply Jesus, himself. Nothing more
16
is needed.

St. Mark makes it clear that the Good News centers on the redemptive death of Jesus. His Good News is for the whole world -- not only for the Jews. He also knows that the Good News is effective only among those who repent, believe, and prepare to engage in costly, self-sacrificial

discipleship (Mark 1:15; 8:35). Through Jesus, God brings about his kingdom, the kingdom in which the creation become transformed into harmony with His divine will.¹⁷

The place of the poor in the Bible deserves our attention. The Gospels not only point out Jesus' personal poverty, but also emphasize his ministry to those rejected by society. In this, the Gospels verify Paul's assertion that, although the Lord Jesus Christ "was rich, for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (II Cor. 8:9). This emphasis on poverty in the life and ministry of Jesus coincides with the social teaching of the Old Testament, where the poor occupy a privileged place. It supported the poverty program of the early church. Luke, in fact, goes as far as to state that the poor are the heirs of the kingdom: "blessed are you poor, for yours is the Kingdom of God (Luke 6:21).¹⁸

The Melbourne Conference Section Report on Good News to the Poor suggests that the poor are "blessed" because of their longing for justice and their hope for liberation. They accept the promise that God has come to their rescue and so discover in his promise their hopes for liberation and a life of human dignity. The coming of the Kingdom, as hope for the poor, and God's judgement comes as a verdict in favour of the poor.¹⁹

The Christian world has been rather polarized between two extremes. One stresses the importance of preaching the

Gospel without regarding the social aspect. The other stresses the importance of the cup of cold water in the name of Christ. Social and spiritual gospels are not alternatives: they belong together. Recently, the two dimensions of the gospel have begun to merge into one whole piece. In the Lausanne Covenant it is stated, "Salvation we proclaim should be transforming us in the totality of our personal and social responsibilities. Faith without works is dead." And those meeting at Pattaya in 1980 committed themselves as follows:

To live under the Lordship of Christ, to work for the evangelization of the world by word and deed, to serve the needy and the oppressed for relief and justice, to love and identify with them, to pray for the church and the world, to study God's word, to give with generosity of Christ, to go wherever He sends, to labour to mobilize Christ's people, to cooperate with all who share the same true Gospel of Christ, to seek the power of the Spirit of Christ, and to wait with eagerness for Christ's return.

In the ecumenical movement, the World Conference on Salvation Today in Bangkok, in 1973, tried to point to the comprehensive significance of salvation -- bringing wholeness to all life. Salvation in Jesus Christ brings about the liberation of individuals from sin and its consequences. The Holistic Mission in Nairobi, in 1975, outlined the mission of the church as "the whole church bringing the whole gospel to the whole person in the whole world."

The Catholic Church also spoke in the same tone:

The message of evangelization is the salvation in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, which is offered to all men as a gift of God's

grace and mercy. Evangelization involves both personal and social aspects, and seek for liberation of men as a whole for the kingdom of God without violence." 24

Truly, the social and personal aspects of the gospel are inseparable. They are in one-ness, and that makes the gospel authentic to all people. Particularly, in the Vietnamese refugee context, only the whole Gospel is appealing and relevant.

3.- Conversion. To receive the Good News, one has to come to the point of conversion. Study in comparative religions indicates that the conversion experience can be found in other religions, as well as in certain ideological communities, though its forms vary. The content of experience differs according to the person and to the ideological system within which the person or group is converted.²⁵

In Christian faith, conversion is a personal reorientation towards God. It is the human response to God's calling, and the conversion must bear fruit in sanctification.²⁶

John R.W. Stott suggests three points:

(1) Conversion is not a work that man can do by himself. It is true that men are described as "turning to the Lord" (Acts 9:35, 11:21), but conversion is something God does, a new birth "from above".

(2) Conversion is not the renunciation of all our inherited culture. Conversion involves repentance, and

repentance is renunciation. This does not take the convert out of the world but sends him back to it, the same person in the same world and yet a new person with a new conviction and new standards.

(3) Conversion is not the end. On contrary, it is a new beginning. It is to be followed by the life of discipleship, by growth into Christian maturity, by membership in the church and by involvement in the world.

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- 20 Michael Green, The first thing last (Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1979) p. 29
- 21 "The Lausanne Covenant", in Mission Trends No.2, p. 243
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- 23 Bassham, p. 99
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Chapter III

VIETNAMESE REFUGEES

As a part of humankind, the Vietnamese people are dominated by sin: personal, interpersonal and systematic sins. Not many countries have experienced as long a history of war as Vietnam. One Vietnamese popular song sums up its history as "One thousand years under Chinese reign, one hundred years as a French domain, thirty years of civil war day and night. The mother's inheritance is only a heap¹ of dry bones, a chain of tombs".

No other war in its history has produced more tragic results than the thirty year war, 1945-1975. In this war, a South Vietnamese soldier was killed in battle every eight minutes, thousands of civilians died and almost seven² million were made refugees. The effect of war has touched every area of life, every family, every person in the land. Much of what took place in Vietnam and Indochina can be explained by the past, by migration and rivalries, by ethnic, social, political, and economic factors. Indochina, as a whole, has had a long history of invasions, occupations, exploitations, and oppressions which would create³ unceasing hatred between nations, regions and villages.

Taking the recent war, alone, thirty years was long enough to shape the thinking and the way of life of one generation. They were born under the thunder of bombers,

grew up in the battlefields, and experienced life through destruction. Their whole life has been, indeed, shaped by the war. Life was cheap, death that took its toll in the thousands was easy. Every Vietnamese has experienced the loss of a member of the family, a relative, or a friend in the battles. Mourning was often seen on the streets. The war created thousands of orphans, widows and homeless people.⁴

Physically, the war has left millions of people -- soldiers and civilians, adults and children alike -- with scars. Many of these scars are clearly seen in physical appearance: deformation of faces, loss of eyes, arms, legs, ect... People have to live with disabilities for the rest of their lives.⁵ The tragedy continued, even more painfully, when people fled from Vietnam. Between forty and seventy percent of the people who left by boat did not reach shore. This means that about 500,000 people were buried in the ocean.⁶ To cite a case in point, in one incident, refugee officials reported that 68 Vietnamese refugees died of starvation, thirst or disease aboard a 39-foot fishing boat that drifted in the South China Sea for 32 days, apparently ignored by at least 40 passing ships.⁷ Pirates tortured men and raped women, leaving most of those who reached the new land with some mark of physical and emotional suffering.⁸

Psychologically, the effect of war is great. People were constantly living in the state of panic and chaos.⁹ Supplies are insufficient. To be last in the line could be

... the end of one's life, so it is better to jostle to the front. To be truthful in the land of exploitations and oppression can be tantamount to committing suicide. The government was untrustworthy and police represented terror. The best way to survive was to lie, to be in front of the crowd, and to have one's needs met here and now.¹⁰

The Communists replaced the corrupt government with even more terror. Almost 1 million former soldiers, officers, and government officials have been imprisoned in the so-called "Re-education Camps". The agony of this kind of imprisonment is that the prisoners don't receive verdicts. Their length of imprisonment is unknown. Many died in the camps because of torture and malnutrition. Those who are released will never be the same, they lose their sanity in various degrees.¹¹

Today, between 500,000 and 1 million Vietnamese people living in the United States were once the targets of Communist persecution; they had to flee for freedom. They had a choice between freedom and death. They risked their lives for the future of their children and grandchildren. They despised the high waves of the sea, the depth of the ocean, and the thunder of storms. They challenged the cruelty of pirates; they ventured into the strange land without knowing whether they would be accepted. They left their loved ones and unwillingly departed from memories. When Bao Quoc Tran, a young Vietnamese composer arrived at Leamsing (an

Island in Thailand which is used for a refugee camp), he entitled his new song "The song on the way to exile", the lyrics are as followed:

As sunset lingers on, I am still standing here on this
lonesome and sad island. My heart longs for my home
country too far away.
Farewell now my land of love thousands by thousands
miles away. Farewell Saigon solemn in the gray sky
of the monsoon afternoons.
Under the sunny sky, the island of Sungai-Wa-Lang stands
lonesome, deserted. Tengah, an island filled with
unceasing homesickness.
Leamsing sadly echoes the sound of ocean waves battering
the shore. I miss my loved ones far away in the lost
horizon.
Tonight the rain on the island causes me to miss home. I
find myself lonesome at this transit refuge. Softly
calling the name of my love, I burst into tears,
sobbing without ceasing.
Oh cold island of Songkhla, Si-khiu bear witness to this
separation by immense ocean.
This afternoon, I am standing here, longing for my home
country far away. I look at the birds stretching
their wings over the sky and wish to become a lone
wing reaching out for my home country.
From the island of Pulau-Pidong I stretch my vision
toward you, my country of love.
Oh, my mother land! Who I am mourning over. Galang is
now filled with sorrows. I weep over Vietnam, my
tear spreads all over. 12

The refugees who escaped by foot suffered even more
tragic experiences. One refugee has told his story like
this:

I am one among the 141 refugees who escaped by foot and
luckily left Northwest 9 refugee camp to settle in the
United States on October 16, 1980.
During the 7 months as a refugee, every night I had
been haunted by nightmares, the unbelievable tragic
realities, the cruel rapes and killings, fear, despair.
We lived in a lowest physical and mental condition of
human lives...We want to talk about the unimaginable
sufferings of the refugees who escaped by foot. They
had been cheated by the so-called "guides". These guides
abandoned them on the strange route for the robbers
taking all their belongings. The refugees were captured

by the Vietnamese Cambodian allied forces who imprisoned them and forced them into heavy labors. Many of them died for whether stepping on mine fields, or being bit by snakes, or caught in the battles, or being killed by the Vietnamese Cambodian Allied Forces, the Khmer Revolutionary Force or Khmer Rouge Force of Pol Pot. Almost all women were continuously raped by the Khmer Revolutionary force, called Para, or of ousted former president Pol Pot. They were beaten, tortured and killed if they resisted. On that journey, they lost their relatives, husbands, wives and children. Hundreds of them lonely suffered when arriving at the refugee camps.

...In the prisons at Non Chan, Non Samet, Non Makmun the fates of Vietnamese refugees were even worse than the ants, worms, or any animal. Women were raped everyday before the eyes of refugees. They were confined in small cells like boxes. They didn't have enough to eat, to drink. While men were working in heavy labors, women were raped. They could not get in touch with the High Commissioner on Refugees of the United Nations if they were not allowed by Para or Pol Pot. It was unlucky for refugees, every time the Vietnamese force launched an attack, the Para killed them in mass, or returned latter to take revenge on the them...The Para exchanged the refugees with HCR for rice. But the agony didn't end after that. For example in a case of a Vietnamese officer of the former government. He escaped from the "Re-Education Camp" and arrived at Non-Chan prison on March 1982. He got in touch with an officer of HRC, and that officer promised to help him on the week after that. Right in that night, the Para crushed his head against the wall and he was dead. When the officer from the HRC came to ask for him, the Para told that he already escaped...13

When they arrived in the United States, the Vietnamese faced whole new problems: housing, unemployment, cultural adjustment. Unlike many other recent immigrants, the Vietnamese refugees are psychologically unprepared for the change. They arrived in the United States during a period of economic recession and high unemployment, leading some Americans to react with open hostility to an influx of refugees, which they feared would create added competition

in a dwindling job market. Those Americans who did welcome the refugees were inexperienced in coping with such large numbers of unexpected immigrants. And many who became sponsors were naive about the many difficulties they would face. The refugees themselves often had unrealistic¹⁴ expectations about life in America.

Many of the refugees live in poverty condition. In Orange County (the largest concentration of Vietnamese refugees) for example, as many as 50 percent of Vietnamese households receive public assistance and 41 percent receive food stamps. The employment profile of the refugees in 1981 is as followed:

Employed	37%
Unemployed	39%
Students	16%
Housewives	6%
Retired	2% 15

A little more than half of all Welfare checks are for \$600 or less per month. Eighty percent of all food stamps are for less than \$200 per month. Theoretically, many Welfare dependent households collect about \$800 a month in aid, and pay \$350 per month for rent. About 5.5 persons will subsist¹⁶ on the balance of \$450.

For those who work, at first glance, the proportion of refugees living in households where the annual income from employment is more than \$24,000 may seem high. In these households however, the income is usually the sum of the salaries of at least two working adults. Forty two percent

of the annual household earnings of employed Indochinese Refugees are less than \$12,000. Taking Vietnamese refugees separately, the income may be slightly higher, but it is still lower than the standard. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1981, an annual income of \$16,618 would support a family of four at a low standard of living in
17
Orange County.

At the same time, the requests for assistances from family members who are still in Vietnam make the financial responsibilities seem unbearable. They have to share homes with one or two other families (sometime as many as twenty four live in a 2 room apartment), so that they can save
18
money to help relatives back home.

Pressure on the Vietnamese refugees concerning family, job, language, housing...has created many degrees of mental problems. According to a study sponsored by DHEW, several respondents to the survey speculated that the mental health problems of refugees who arrived in the United States in 1975 were beginning, only now, to surface, as a delayed reaction to earlier trauma. Some respondents speculated that those refugees who have arrived recently may not experience emotional distress until some time later, but many respondents felt that the recent experiences undergone by refugees, during and directly after their departure from their homeland, would exacerbate the problems. The confusion and trauma of departure from their homeland and life in

refugee camps in Southeast Asia, coupled with the effects of grief and loss known to have been experienced by some refugees, may herald a sharp increase in mental health¹⁹ problems among Vietnamese refugees in the near future.

The same study also indicates that the age group from 19-35 is the one most at risk with respect to mental health problem. This group contains the majority of single adults experiencing problems of depression, violence against self, alcoholism, and feelings of helplessness. These are the persons most excluded from the traditional family support system. Also in this group there are young married couples reported to be experiencing family and marital conflicts. They acculturate too quickly, seem to have discarded many of the values of their parents and homeland, and substitute the²⁰ perceived value system of young Americans.

The 36-55 age group comes next in terms of problems. Depression and family conflict are two severe problems experienced by these refugees. Family conflict is at times reported as being caused by the changing role of women, with a resultant shift in the role of the male head of household. Results of the survey show that there has been a high incidence of culture shock caused by the loss of the husband's traditional role and status within the family, based on his employment status. Furthermore, the economic necessity for a wife to work has led to culture shock in some cases. For those 55 and older, cases of depression,

isolation, loneliness, loss of family and homeland, and a²¹
feeling of helplessness are commonly seen.

In general, the Vietnamese appear to have a broader range of problems, though of less severity, than other Indo-Chinese ethnic groups. The Vietnamese refugees are reported showing a higher level of anxiety than the other groups. They tend to mistrust other members of their own ethnic group, and thus, to lack cohesion within the Vietnamese²² communities.

Social problems among the refugees continue to increase. The number of run-away teenagers is high, and often they are lured into gangs or become victims of gang²³ killings. Cases of gang extortions, killings, and drug dealing are reported among the young people who, on the one hand, have lost traditional values and, on the other hand, cannot appreciate the new values. It is difficult for them to find their identity in this country.

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Chapter IV

UNDERSTANDING BUDDHISM IN VIETNAM

After the Buddha had attained Nirvana, Buddhism made its way to all parts of Asia: Theravada came to Ceylon, Thailand, Cambodia; Mahayana went to Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan. Buddhism came to Vietnam from both direction: Mahayana came from China at the same time as Confucianism and Taoism; Theraveda came from Thailand, Laos and Cambodia as¹ the result of trade between these countries.

Influence of Buddhism on the history of Vietnam

By the third century, B.C., Vietnam had begun to emerge as a nation, but it was still influenced by the Chinese. For that reason some historians consider Vietnam to have been at that time, a province of China -- Giao Chau.² There are conflicting views as to the timing of the acceptance of Buddhism. Did China receive Buddhism before it came to Vietnam or did it come to both countries at the same time. Since the Indians and Chinese had used Giao Chau as a trading center after Second Century, B.C., Buddhism may have come directly from India.³ Two well-known Chinese Buddhist scholars, Mou-Po (189 AD) and K'ang Chen Hui (250 AD), for instance, both grew up in Giao Chau. Even so, Vietnamese Buddhism became stronger only because of the Chinese translation of Scriptures from Pali.⁴

As legend has it: during the time of Shih Hsieh (Si-Nhiep, 187-226), a holy man named Tu Dinh from Fu-nan, on the lower Mekong, established himself in a village near Luy Lau, where he practiced asceticism. He was a simple man who violated all the norms of propriety. He took the name Man, meaning "barbarian", and had a daughter named Man Nuong , "Barbarian Lady".

Toward the end of the reign of Emperor Ling (168-189), a monk of the Brahman caste from Western India, named Khau-da-la (Ksudra), arrived from the South, performing miracles and preaching Buddhism. Tu Dinh worshipped him as a living Buddha and constrained him to stay as his guest. Tu Dinh's daughter, Man Nuong, became a disciple of Khau-da-la and learned from him the wisdom of the Buddha as well as the art of making rain. Eventually, her reputation reached the ears of Shih Hsieh after she ended a drought with her spiritual powers.

On one occasion a typhoon uprooted a gigantic banyan tree and deposited it at the front gate of Shih Hsieh's palace. The efforts of three hundred men could not move the tree out of the way. Man Nuong was called in and she easily lifted up the tree. That tree was recognized as a sacred object. Four statues were carved from it, representing the Buddhas of clouds, rain, thunder and lightning. Temples were built for each of the statues (Phap Van - Cloud, Phap Vu - Cloud, Phap Loi - Thunder, Phap dien - lightning). Shih

Hsieh further dedicated Man Nuong's retreat as the Phuc Nhan Temple, "Temple of the Blessed Grotto."⁵

From 571-939 AD, Buddhism became deeply rooted in the land of Vietnam under the leadership of Indian and Chinese Thien (Ch'an, Zen) Masters who belonged to Vinitaruci and Vongon-Thong Thien Schools. A good number of Thien masters and monks were trained to pave the way for the golden age of Vietnamese Buddhism in the Dinh, Le, Ly and Tran dynasties⁶ (968-1400).

After successfully driving the Chinese out of the country in 939, Ngo Quyen reigned for 5 years. He died in 944, leaving the country in a state of chaos. Dinh Bo Linh, a general under Ngo Quyen, conquered the country⁷ and started to reign in 968. During the reign of Dinh Tien Hoang (royal title of Dinh Bo Linh), Buddhism began to flourish. He chose Buddhism as the national religion, and used Buddhist teachings as principles for government. He organized monastic orders and invited them to participate in the government. To the Venerable Ngo Chan Luu he gave the name "Khuon Viet Thai Su," which meant an advisor who helped⁸ to develop Vietnam.

After Dinh Bo Linh died, his oldest son, Dinh Lien, was murdered, his youngest son, Dinh Tue, who was only six years old, succeeded to his throne, but all the power was in the hands of General Le Hoan. Thien Master Ngo-Chan-Luu, himself designed and led a peaceful coup to replace the Dinh

family with the Le family.

Le-Hoan was enthroned with the title King Le Dai Hanh and reigned from 980-988. He, again, named Thien Master Ngo-Chan-Luu as "Khuon Viet Thai Su". Khuon Viet Thai Su was the chief political advisor of King Le Dai Hanh. The King gave him the highest respect, and entrusted to him all diplomatic and military matters.⁹

Buddhism saturated the land under the first Buddhist king, Ly-Thai-To (1010-1028), who was enthroned after a coup¹⁰ led by Thien Master Van Hanh. Van Hanh was one of the Thien Masters who served as advisors in the Le Dynasty. The last Le king, Le-Long-Dinh, was a wicked king. The common people suffered terribly during his reign. When Le-Long-Dinh died, Van Hanh planned a coup, overthrew the Le Dynasty and placed Ly-Cong-Uan, a Royal Guard Commander, on the throne. Van-Hanh's intention was to clean up all vestiges of Le-Long-Dinh's reign to satisfy popular demand (especially because of Le-Long-Dinh's persecution of Buddhist monks), and to reform the declining society.

A story went like this: One day, a thunder storm hit Ly-Cong-Uan's native village. The lightning struck one cotton tree, and from the shell there appeared a prophetic poem saying:

Goc cay trang trang
Co cay xanh xanh
Hoa dao moc nga
Thap bat tu thanh
Dong-A nhap dia
Cay khac lai xanh

Cung trang vang nhat
 Cung doai an tinh
 Khoang sau bay nam
 Thien ha thai binh

Roughly translated as:

A trunk of a whitish tree
 Standing on a green pasture
 A peach tree was stricken down
 And there came out a plum tree
 The tree Dong A roots into the soil
 Other tree becomes green
 The moon turns pale
 And evil spirit hides in the palace
 After about seven years
 Peace will come to people.

Van-Hanh Thien Master told Ly-Cong-Uan that "Hoa-Dao" was the word for LE, "Thap Bat Tu" was the word for LY, "Dong-A" was the word for TRAN, "Cay khac lai xanh" meant that the LE dynasty would fall, and the LY family would reign. Six to seven years later, there would be peace.

There was also another story: One day, King Le-Long-Dinh ate a Carambola (khe), and he saw a plum seed (hat ly) -- the Vietnamese word for plum has the same spelling as the family nam LY. The king recalled the prophetic poem, so he ordered the killing of all persons who bore the LY family name. He didn't realize that Ly-Cong-Uan was serving in his palace.

These two stories, undoubtedly, were the products of Van-Hanh Thien Master. He master-minded the prophetic poem and the LY seed story, and spread them among the people. He took advantage of the superstition of the common people -- who believed in gods, spirits and devils -- to manipulate

human hearts and to pave the way to the throne for his disciple. We need to be aware also that this political conspiracy was under way when king Le-Long-Dinh was still alive. If the cruel king had not already died, a bloody coup would have taken place to overthrow him.

The Ly family reigned over Vietnam for 216 years by 9 kings. The independent government of Vietnam grew stronger under these Buddhist influenced leaders. It was the time to lay the foundation for the future Vietnam.

Ly-Thai-To (Royal title of Ly-Cong-Uan) was raised up in the temple, and there, he went directly to the political arena. Therefore, his first effort was to favor and develop Buddhism. He named Van Hanh Thien Master as Royal Advisor. He helped build 8 temples in Bac Ninh, where he grew up; 9 temples in Thang Long (Ha-noi) and Chan Giao temple, where he often invited monks into the palace for meditation. He sent Nguyen Dao Thanh to China to get the Tripikata Buddhist Scriptures. He gave uniforms and supported monks throughout the country.¹¹

Other Ly kings also highly respected and supported Buddhism. Ly-Thai-Tong built the Dien-Huu temple, also known as Chua Mot Cot (One pillar temple), in Ha-noi. This temple was built on one pillar in the middle of a lake and was a very famous attraction until it was destroyed in 1954.¹² Ly-Thanh-Tong built Tinh-Lu and Sung-Khanh temples, the Dai-Thang Tu-Thien 12-story tower, and 95 other temples. In

1069, after conquering Chiem-Thanh, he led some prisoners back home. Among those prisoners, he later found Thao-Duong Thien Master. He made Thao Duong his chief advisor and asked him to stay at Khai Quoc temple. It was here that Thao-Duong started the third Thien School in Vietnam. He called it the Thao Duong Thien School. The king became a student under Thao Duong and later became a Thien Master, himself.¹³ Ly-Nhan-Tong built Lam-Son Temple. Thien Master Kho-Dau was his chief advisor. The Queen also used her own money to build about 100 temples. The King gave land and supplied incense and candles to the temples. He established the Tam-Truong Examination which tested applicants for government offices on the subjects of Buddhism, Confucianism and Taoism. Any Confucianist or Taoist who wanted to serve in the government had to study Buddhism in depth.¹⁴

The Tran dynasty began in 1225. The first Tran King, Tran-Thai-Tong was also a devout Buddhist. At first, he wanted to be a monk, but he was later convinced by Truc Lam, the Thien Master, that there was no Buddha in the mountain, but Buddha was in ourselves. "There is no Buddha in the mountain. Buddha is in our heart. If our heart is calm and our mind is opened, it is Buddha. If you are awakened by that spirit, you become a Buddha right at your place; you don't need to search at any other place." (Trong núi vốn không có Phật, Phật ở trong tâm ta, nếu tâm lặng lại và trí tuệ xuất hiện đó chính là Phật. Nếu bề-hà giác ngộ tâm ấy

thi tuc khac thanh Phat ngay tai cho, khong can phai di tim
¹⁵
 cuc nhoc o ben ngoai). Tran-Thai-Tong agreed to return to
 the palace, where he studied Buddhism. He wrote two famous
 books, "Thuyen Ton Chi Nam" (Thien Mannual) and "Khoa-Hu"
¹⁶
 (No-thingness).

Tran-Nhan-Tong, the third Tran King, became a devout
 Buddhist at a very early age. He left the palace, became
 a monk at Truc-Lam Temple in Yen-Tu mountain, and studied
 under Tue-Trung Thuong-Si Thien Master. He later became a
 Thien Master, himself. He instructed thousands of disciples,
 and Truc-Lam Yen-Tu became one of the pure Vietnamese Thien
 Schools. Today, Vietnamese Buddhists consider him to be a
 shining star who knew how to apply Buddhism rightly and
¹⁷
 became an awakened one.

Beginning with the reign of Tran-Anh-Ton (1293),
 Buddhism was supported by the King, but it was already being
 infiltrated with magic feats and sorceries, which were
 probably influences of Lamaism and Tantrism from Tibet and
 China. This was the beginning of a period which Thich Mat
¹⁸
 The called "the period of departure from original Buddhism".

In 1429, King Le-Thai-To established an examination
 for monks. Only those who passed could continue to stay in
 the temples. Those who failed must return to secular life.
 This reflected the situation at that time, when the majority
 of monks were poorly educated and did not understand
 Buddhism.

In 1434, King Le-Thai-Tong gave orders the statue of Buddha to be brought from Phap Van temple to the palace so that he could pray for rain. This incident shows the influence of Lamaism and Tantrism from king to subjects. The next year, the king ordered a statue of his grandmother to be made, and he asked Thien Master Hue-Hong to perform the opening rite. Thich Mat The considered this to degrade the¹⁹ role of a Thien Master to that of a magician.

Vietnamese Buddhism declined until the 20th²⁰ century. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, there were spotty revivals, but they were not strong enough to spread nationwide. Among the Vietnamese Thien masters, there was Chan-Nguyen who revived the Truc-Lam Yen-Tu School and wrote several books on Buddhism. Also, this century marked a comeback of Chinese Thien masters who came and built several²¹ temples across the country.

In the early 20th century, there were some movements to revive Buddhism. There was one attempt to form a Unified Buddhism in 1927, but this did not succeed. Nevertheless, many small regional organizations were formed such as "Hoi Nam-Ky Nghien-Cuu Phat-Giao" in 1932 (Southern Organization for Buddhist study) in Saigon; "Hoi An-nam Phat-Hoc" (Annamite Organization for Buddhist Study) in the central part of the country, and "Hoi Phat Giao Bac-Ky" in 1934 (Northern Organization of Buddhism). The first school to²² train monks was established in 1938...

In 1963, Vietnamese Buddhists entered a, new era, an era of resistance, of defense of their faith. On May 7, 1963, on Buddha's birthday, the government of Hue City ordered all Buddhist flags taken down. Buddhists, under the direction of the General Organization of Buddhism protested. Eight of them were killed by police. The continued resistance featured a chain of self-burning suicides by monks.²³ The conflict increased; president Ngo Dinh Diem refused to compromise. On November 1, 1963, he was overthrown and killed by a coup d'etat led by the Military Council. After that, all Buddhist organizations and schools formed Unified Vietnamese Buddhism (Phat-Giao Viet-Nam Thong-Nhat).²⁴

Vietnamese Buddhism gradually became strong, not so much a in spiritual sense, but more or less as a political force. Every politician treated it as a campaign issue. Even so, Buddhists continued to struggle through a period which they often called "a period of Diem without Diem".

In April, 1975, just like other Vietnamese, the Buddhists experienced a traumatic change. Since then, those who were left behind -- especially monks -- have been persecuted.²⁵ Those who could escape experienced the agony that most refugees did. This has already mentioned in Chapter III.

The Buddhist Influence on Vietnamese Culture

From the beginning of Buddhism in Vietnam (Giao Chau

at that time) until the end of the first period, which was dominated by the Chinese, Buddhism was still weak. There were temples and monks, but Buddhism was still considered as one among many religions.²⁶

During the Dinh (968) and Le (980) dynasties, there was only an inclination toward Buddhism. Under the Ly dynasty (1010) Buddhism penetrated everywhere from palace to villages. The spirit of Thien was spread into all cultural media.²⁷

Today, Buddhism is the most important religion in Vietnam. It has a great influence Vietnamese customs and traditions.²⁸ Buddhist temples are everywhere. From cities to villages, the echoes of temple bells can be heard at every sunset and every sunrise. That sound which is always related to peace and rest, inspires poets, novelists and composers. Chua Huong (Incense Temple), Chua Thien-Mu²⁹ (Heavenly Lady Temple), are familiar to all people.

Folk songs often mention Buddhist life such as:

Tu dau bang tu tai nha,
Tho cha kinh me hon la di tu.

Roughly translated as:

Nowhere is better than home to practice Buddhism,
Filial piety is far better than monastery life.

Or:

Thu nhat tu tai gia,
Thu nhi tu tai cho,
Thu ba tu tai Chua.

Roughly translated as:

First, be a monk at home,
 Then, be a monk at the market,
 And last, be a monk at the temple. 30

To the Vietnamese, the funeral is very important. Mourning is a way to show respect for the dead. When parents are still alive, children have to support them, when they die, the funeral must be duly taken care of in a respectful manner. Mourning is the beginning of the worship of parents. In the funeral, we often see a band of monks leading the procession while praying for the dead to go to the Western
 31
 Paradise.

After the 15th century, Buddhism became a popular religion without any structure. Most of the monks were illiterates. They created many kinds of superstition and complex rites to please the poorly educated. They could no
 32
 longer understand the depth of Buddha's teachings. They worshipped Buddha as well as other gods. They mixed religion with superstition as Toan Anh stated in his book Nguoi Viet Dat Viet (The Vietnamese and the land of Vietnam): "They believe because they believe, they follow because they
 33
 follow, no one can ask why they believe". For example, if there are some weak children who easily get sick, the parents will bring them to the temple to give them away to Buddhas so that the Buddhas and gods can take care of them and heal them. This is a way to have children adopted by Buddhas or other gods who are worshipped at the temple. The child will bear the family name of the god of that temple.

After the child reaches the age of 16, the parents can³⁴ perform a special ceremony to redeem the child. P. Louvet, a French anthropologist, observed the religious situation in Vietnam, and said:

In Vietnam, religions and superstitions are mixed together, built on each other to form a mixed reality with all kinds of conflicting beliefs that can hardly be understood. People believe in everything. Educated people, including kings, who are proud of accepting only the right things, and only following the teachings of Confucius, still believe in Buddha, give offerings to spirits, and trust in palm reading when needed".³⁵

In my own interviews, I have found that between 95 and 98 percent of Buddhists don't know the Buddha's Four Noble Truths and Eight Fold Path. What they know is very fragmented, incoherent and superstitious. As such we can see how far Vietnamese Buddhism has departed from the original teachings of Buddha as Thich Mat The has observed.

However, the impact of Buddhism on the Vietnamese people is still great. Chua Huong (Incense Temple) is one of the most popular tourist attractions in Vietnam. It is well known for its gorgeous landscape and architecture, but even more popular is its Festival (Hoi Chua Huong).

Every year, this festival begins at the beginning of January and lasts until the end of February. To the peasants, these two months are a time to enjoy the New Year. People from everywhere come to Chua Huong, either to worship Buddha, or to see the attractions.

Chua Huong is a series of temples, scattered on a

limestone mountain in Ha Dong Province of North Vietnam. The main temple is Huong Tich, where Phat Ba Quan Am (The Lady Buddha Quan Am) and other Buddhas are worshipped.³⁶

In the South, Linh-Son Thanh-Mau temple and its festivals are also very important. It is located on the highest mountain of the South and the Buddha of this temple is Linh-Son Thanh-Mau (The Lady Buddha of the Holy Mountain). It is a custom for many Vietnamese to visit Linh-son Thanh-Mau during the New Year to pray for fortune, happiness and also to see the attractions.³⁷

We need to note that the Lady Buddhas are characteristics of Vietnamese Buddhism. Buddhist refugees often prayed to the Lady Buddha Quan Am to protect them from dangers during their attempts to escape. She is as popular as Amitabha (A-di-da) to the Vietnamese Buddhists.

The following description, typical of Buddhist temples in Vietnam, reveals the ways in which Vietnamese Buddhists worship:

The Main Hall, which is also called the Incense Hall, for the incense is burnt unceasingly here, is where all Buddha statues are placed:

On the highest row, there are three Buddha statues of the same size, representing all Buddhas everywhere throughout the ages: past, present, and future.

The next row is the Amitabha Trinity, with Amitabha in the middle, and the smaller statues of Avalokitesvara

(Quan The Am) and Mahasiharia (Dai Chi The) at its sides.

On the third row is the statue of Siddhartha Buddha with 2 smaller Boddhisattvas, one at each side.

On the fourth row is the image of the Baby Siddhartha with 9 dragons surrounding him. There are also Boddhisattvas and heavenly creatures in the cloud.

At the sides of the nine-dragon image, are the images of two gods wearing royal garments. Some temples replace these gods with others.

At Theravadan temples, there is only the image of Siddhartha Buddha.

The Devotional Hall is located in front of the Main Hall. This is where monks and followers come for devotion. There are images and altars in this hall too.

At the junction with the Main Hall, there are images of two protectors, one on each side. One is the good, the other is the evil; one looks very kind, the other looks very cruel.

At the top of the Devotional Hall, there is an image of a god who is accepted as the Earth God of the temple. Next to the Earth God is the altar and image of the dragon god, a dragon king who followed Buddha.

At the right-hand side of the Devotional Hall are the altar and image of Ananda. At some temples, there are halls depicting ten sections of hell (Thap-Dien Thien-Vuong).³⁹

Temples are also the centers of martial arts. Thien

Masters are often the masters of martial art schools. Several stories have been passed through generations telling how these Buddhist monks skillfully used the subtle technique to defend themselves and to help save the weak.

Not until 1947 was "Gia-dinh Phat-tu" (Organization of Buddhist Family) established to develop a curriculum for teaching Buddhism to children and youth and to train leaders⁴⁰ for local children's and youth groups.

In 1964, the first Buddhist College was established. It was a liberal art school to teach not only Buddhism but also other subjects to all people. Two publishing houses were started in 1965-1967. Books published by these two publishing houses were not restricted to Buddhism. They dealt also with other cultural and philosophical subjects, so⁴¹ they were well known among the Vietnamese intellectuals. These effort did not last long after the Communists took over in 1975. The government confiscated all these properties and restricted the activities of Buddhism as well as other⁴² religions.

In the United States, Vietnamese Buddhist leaders tried hard to establish a College of Buddhism "Dai Hoc Dong-Phuong" in Los Angeles, a Center for Buddhist Study (Phat Hoc Vien Quoc-Te) and a Publishing House (An-Quan Ananda) in Sepulveda, California. They have not been able to make a significant impact on the life of the refugees in their social context.

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NOTES

- 1 Anh Toan, Tin-Nguong Viet-Nam V.1 (Lancaster: Xuan Thu, 1982) p.48
- 2 Keith Weller Taylor, The Birth of Vietnam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983) p.7-13
- 3 The Mat Thich, Viet-Nam Phat-Giao Su-Luoc (Sepulveda: Phat-Hoc-Vien Quoc Te, 1984) pp. 39,65-68. Also see Viet Khoi Ly, 2000 nam Phat-Giao Viet- Nam (Sepulveda: Phat Hoc Vien Quoc Te, 1981) p.60, and Taylor, p. 80
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Taylor, pp. 81-82
- 6 The Mat Thich, pp. 70-162
- 7 Son Van Pham, Viet-Su Toan-Thu (Saigon: Tu-sach Su-Hoc, Canh Ty) p. 157
- 8 Ly, p. 85ff. And also see The Mat Thich, p. 109
- 9 Ibid., p.89
- 10 Kim Trong Tran, Viet-Nam Su-Luoc V.1 (Saigon: Trung-Tam Hoc-Lieu, 1971) p. 94
- 11 Pham, p. 179
- 12 Ibid., p. 224
- 13 Ly, p. 96
- 14 Pham, p. 224

15

Ly, p. 107

16

The Mat Thich, p. 147

17

Lac Bao Thich, Kien-Thuc Can-Ban Phat-Giao (Sepulveda: Phat-Hoc-Vien Quoc-Te, 1982) p. 378

18

The Mat Thich, p. 165 ff. Lamaism is the religion of the lamas. It represents an amalgamation of Tantric Buddhism with some features of the indigeous Bon faith of the Tibetans who believe in their own gods and demons who can give blessing and curse. Lightning, flood, pestilence ect., are the acts of these gods. Tantrism is derived from the Sanskrit Tantra which has the general meaning of that which spreads knowledge, and a limited meaning of an esoteric literature. It is often considered to be the third and final interpretation of the teaching of Buddha, and is called Tantrayana. One of the characteristics of Tantrism is the use of magical formulas invokes the gods to increase one's prosperity or to harm one's ennemy. Tantras Buddhism approaches the lowest classes of people, accepts their occult arts and monstrous deities, and complies with their yearning for magic and sorcery. See Kenneth K.B. Ch'en, Buddhism in China (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) p. 327 and 417.

19

Ibid.,p. 172

20

Ly, p. 154

21

Ibid., p. 170ff

22

Dat Kiem, Lich-su Tranh-dau Phat-Giao (Sepulveda: Phat-Hoc Vien Quoc-Te, 1981) p. 70ff

23

Ibid., p. 126

24

Anh Toan, Tin-Nguong Viet-Nam (Lancaster: Xuan Thu, 1982) p. 286

25

Kiem, p. 232 ff

- 26
The Mat Thich, p. 74
- 27
Pham, p. 224
- 28
Anh Toan, Nguoi Viet Dat Viet (Saigon: Kim-Lai An-Quan, 1967) p. 277
- 29
Anh Toan, Nep-Cu (Saigon: Nha Xuat-Ban Xuan-Thu, 1965) p. 289
- 30
Phuong Truc Nguyen, Van-Hoc Binh-Dan (Saigon: Trung Tam Hoc Lieu, 1968), p. 98
- 31
Anh Toan, Phong-Tuc Viet-Nam (Glendale: DaiNam, 1976) p.497ff
- 32
Ham Quang Duong, Viet-Nam Van-Hoc Su (Saigon: Trung-Tam Hoc-Lieu, 1968) p. 60
- 33
Toan, Nguoi Viet Dat Viet, p. 309
- 34
Toan, Phong-Tuc Viet-Nam, p. 476
- 35
Toan, Tin-Nguong Viet-Nam, p. 19
- 36
Anh Toan, Hoi-He Dinh Dam (Saigon: Nam Chi Tung Thu, 1969) pp. 166-177. The main deity of this temple is Phat Ba Quan Am, probably is the distinctive Buddha of Vietnamese Buddhism. See Appendix A
- 37
Ibid., pp. 195-201. See Appendix B
- 38
Toan, Tin-Nguong Viet-Nam, p. 293
- 39
Dat Kiem, Lich-su Gia-Dinh Phat-Tu (Sepulveda: Phat-Hoc Vien Quoc-Te, 1981) pp. 21ff

40

Nghia Tin, Hien-tinh Phat-Giao Viet-Nam (Sepulveda:
Phat-Hoc Vien Quoc-Te, 1981) pp.91-93

41

Ibid, p. 140ff

42

Ibid.

Chapter V

VIETNAMESE CHRISTIAN AND BUDDHIST DIALOGUE

Attitude of Christians towards Buddhism

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, Buddhism came to Vietnam by two different routes: The Theravada through Thailand, Laos and Cambodia; and the Mahayana through China. Among the Buddhist schools coming from China, there were Thien (or Ch'an), Pureland, T'ientai, etc. Thien was the most influential school. Later on, Pureland almost merged with Thien in content as well as in form.¹

Theravada, or Canonical Buddhism² is essentially a discipline for personal salvation by an individual for himself. This salvation is possible only for those who join the monastic order to become monks or nuns. The monk is intent on the accumulation of meritorious Karma for his own salvation and these merits cannot be transferred to others. After entry into the order, the monk strives to become an arhat or perfect saint. The arhat is a cold, severe, passionless being who has put an end to his cravings and who holds himself aloof from society to practice the religious life by himself and for himself.² He regards Buddha as a human teacher who lived on earth, carried out his mission, and then passed into Nirvana. He cannot help other human beings. Each individual has to work out salvation for himself.³

In the Mahayana, Buddha is regarded as an eternal being who is the embodiment of universal and cosmic truth, who is neither born nor dies but lives from eternity to eternity. To save errant humankind from evil, this eternal Buddha became incarnated as the historical Sakyamuni (Sakyamuni means "the Sage of the Sakya clan", a title⁴ applied to Siddhartha after he attained enlightenment). The eternal Buddha has created phantom appearances on earth countless times in the past and will continue to do so in the⁵ future.

Murakami Sencho, author of the 5-volume Bukkyo Toitsuron (On Unifying Buddhism), asserted that Mahayana was not the teaching of the historical Buddha. The teaching about Amitabha is in Sutras, to whom the Vietnamese Buddhists give devotion not datable to Sakyamuni himself. It is a teaching about a symbolic being, a personified ideal in an idealized, mythical land. The eighteenth vow of the Bodhisattva Dharmakara (who became Amitabha), by the power of which aspirants are saved, is now suspected of being the figment of the vivid imagination of an unknown writer. whomsoever tradition accepted as the revealer of this path was⁶ unknown to Sakyamuni.

Kenneth K.S.Ch'en has pointed out some of the reasons to believe that the Sun-worship of the Zoroastrians influenced Mahayana Buddhism. First, in Zoroastrianism, there is the heaven of boundless light presided over by Ahura-

Mazda, described as full of light and brilliance. Such Mahayana Buddhas as Vairocana, the Brilliant One, and Dipankara, Light Maker, are indicative of sun-worship. Amitabha also bears the name Amitayus, Infinite Light. Second, an Iranian deity, Zurvan Akaranak, also has the connotation of infinite time and space. There was probably a connection between the Pureland Triad of Amitabha, Avalokitesvara (representing light), Mahasthama (representing force), and an Iranian Trinity, in which Zuran is the supreme deity, Mithras the luminous element, and Vrthragna, force and wisdom. Third, it is pointed out that these ideas in Buddhism developed not in India proper but in those areas in Northwest India and beyond, where the Kushan Dynasty was dominant and where Iranian influences were strong. The fourth reason was that, the first monk to introduce and translate a "Pureland Sutra" in China was An Shih-Kao, a Parthian. He was followed by other monks from Central Asia, Chi'h Ch'ien, whose ancestors were from Yueh-chih (Scythia), and K'ang Seng-hui, a Sogdian. Taken singly, these points may not have very much significance, but, taken as a whole, they provide strong reasons to believe that Mahayana⁷ development was influenced by Iranian elements.

When this Mahayana system of belief was introduced into Vietnam, it was abused by superstitious people as they⁸ mixed elements of Buddhism with superstitious practices. Buddhist intellectuals have tried to eliminate such

superstitions from Buddhism, but it seems, so far, a losing battle. Thich Bao Lac in his book, Kien-Thuc Can-Ban Phat-Giao, considers the superstitious practice at Buddhist temples (palm reading, praying for the dead etc.), as not Buddhist, but he thinks that it is necessary for such kind of practices to continue to fill the needs of common people and to bring Buddhism to the people at their own level.

Superstitions will be eliminated when they understand more⁹ about Buddhist teachings. For that reason, Christians often identify Buddhism as a religion of superstition. The missionaries consider it wholly pagan. The riches of Buddhism have never been discovered and appreciated by Vietnamese Christians.

Buddhism and Salvation

The flexibility of Buddhism in the Vietnamese context is a two edged sword: it helps Buddhism expand rapidly beyond any geographical and cultural boundaries (eg. the worship of ancestors of the Vietnamese is very well fitted into Buddhism), but at the same time, the riches of Buddha's teachings are easily overshadowed by superstitious practices. At any rate, millions of people have searched for salvation through Buddhism. Kings left palaces and assumed the monastic life; young lovers left those they dearly loved to become monks. Temples were places where thousands of people sought inner peace. Buddhist moral values were passed

from generation to generation. What has made Buddhism so attractive to Asian in general and to the Vietnamese in particular?

Buddhism emerged when India was an unjust society. The caste system bound millions of Indians in suffering. There were four major castes: The Brahman, the Ksatriya, the Vaiya, and the Sudra. The first two castes constituted the ruling class; the later two, the ruled class. From generation to generation, the children of Sudra were always slaves of the others.¹⁰ Prince Siddhartha responded to the cry of the people of his time. He saw the sufferings of peasants who worked from early in the morning until late at night without rest, while his father and he enjoyed riding in luxury in the chariot. The differences in the two styles of life made him suffer unbearably. The misery of mankind, the social injustice, never faded from his memory.¹¹ He went out to search for emancipation from human suffering. The truth that Siddhartha Buddha found was the escape from the cycle of rebirth and realization of Nirvana. As suffering is the chief characteristic of the cycle of existence, Nirvana would be the cessation of suffering. By practicing the discipline of Thien, the individual puts an end to craving. When craving is extinguished, no more karma is generated and there is no further rebirth. When rebirth is terminated, the individual realizes Nirvana.¹² Therefore, Nirvana is salvation. Nirvana is primordial and ultimate, beyond all time and space.

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Nirvana can be realized at any time, in any place. Truc-Lam Thien Master, the father of the Vietnamese Thien school, has aptly asserted:

There is no Buddha in the mountain. Buddha is in our heart. If our heart is calm and our mind is opened, it is Buddha. If you are awakened by that spirit, you become Buddha right at your place, you don't need to look for it at any other place. 14

Thich Bao Lac affirmed the same belief:

Nirvana is in the present life: when we have right actions, right speeches, good works, our minds become peaceful, that is Nirvana. 15

16

The path toward salvation, as was found by the Buddha, calls people to the highest moral standard, a standard which challenged the social injustice of that time. The context is similar to that in which Jeremiah, Ezekiel and the author of Second Isaiah performed their prophetic ministries: the poor are neglected and oppressed, people turned away from God's standard. Buddha, as well as Israel's prophets, was an agent of God to call people to return to the a conscience in the axial age.

17

C.S. Song goes even further: "Buddhism, like Christianity, was, religion of salvation, and what the people needed was a way of salvation." To support this line of argument, Song cited the case of Cyrus in Second Isaiah, who had succeeded to the great empire of Astyages the Mede. Although he was a foreigner, the author of Second Isaiah called him "God's anointed" (45:1), "God's shepherd" (44:28), and even "Yahweh loves him, he performs His purpose

on Babylon and on the seed of Chaldeans" (48:14b)¹⁸. Another foreigner during the time of exile used by God to do His plan was king Nebuchadnezzar. Jeremiah called him God's servant, "I will send for my servant Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon to punish them"¹⁹ (Jeremiah 25:9).

God moved beyond all boundaries because He alone created the world and planned the salvation of His creation. If God could use Israel's prophets like Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the author of Second Isaiah, or foreigners such as Cyrus and Nebuchadnezzar, He surely could include Siddhartha in His plan of salvation.

Suffering people and Suffering Servant

It was Siddhartha Buddha who pointed out the symptom, "suffering," of the human problem, "sin," and found the way to stop it through the Eightfold Path. The Asian people, the Vietnamese in particular, easily relates to this experience. A Vietnamese popular saying is "Life is the ocean of sufferings" (Doi la be kho). And C.S. Song suitably concludes that suffering is the mark of existence of Asian people:

For Asians, Suffering - dukkha - now as in ancient times, is never simply a mental state. Suffering is first and foremost a physical reality. 20

The Vietnamese refugees know far better than anyone else that this statement is true. In their 2000 years of history and during recent events, suffering has overwhelmed the people, and the people have been submerged in sufferings.

The teaching of Buddha had come as an affirmation of what they had already experienced and were bound to. So they quickly embraced it. But most of them could not achieve the goal that Buddha had set. Furthermore, they did not only search for the cessation of suffering, but also for happiness. The average Vietnamese Buddhist is like the average Thai Buddhist. He or she can not go all the way with Buddhism, since it teaches that the elimination of "suffering" also requires the elimination of happiness, celebration, and the fulfillment of basic human needs, leaving nothing but an unexplained Nirvana.²¹ For that reason, according to my research, more than 95% of Vietnamese Buddhists don't know, or don't even care to know, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Nirvana, whether an experience or a futuristic reality, is just utopia, and only a very few dream of it. The majority take Buddhism as moral standards and social forms. Their frustration has increased since the tragedy in 1975. The Buddhist refugee has received almost no assistance from Buddhist communities. To tell these refugees to stop craving is very absurd because they all want to live, and they cling to the hope of the abundant life.

As the author of Second Isaiah, who lived in the same period with Siddhartha, has pointed out, concerning the root of suffering: "We all like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid

on him the iniquity of us all" (Isaiah 53:6 RSV). He foretold the coming and ministry of the Suffering Servant, who not only experiences the pain, but takes away human suffering also.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief and as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed (Isaiah 57:3-5 RSV)

Human beings cannot save themselves. God knows that and people feel that, too. The Israelites in no way satisfied God by their own effort. Even those who found the teaching of Buddha interesting did not follow his path of salvation. Human beings need the Other Power to save them by grace through faith, which was promised in the Jewish teachings but was not promised by the historical Siddhartha. The appearance of the figure of Amida makes me suspect the link between Jewish Messianic expectation and Mahayana Buddhism. As we had a good case of Zoroastrianism's influence on Mahayana, here we could have the case of Mahayana's borrowing Judeo-Christian elements.

About a generation after Zoroaster (628-551 BC), the great Cyrus came to power. In 558 BC, he brought Median and Persian kingdoms together in the Medo-Persian empire. By 538 BC, all Western Asia to the Egyptian frontier was his. Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, though not a zealous or intolerant

adherent. As an empire builder, he was willing to compromise among religions in order to keep peace among the many groups of his far-flung realm. Under the Persian kings, the Jews won favor that permit them to exist as a definable entity, and have freedom of religion. The unified kingdom, religious tolerance, and the use of Aramic as the official language of the Western part of the empire, might have been vehicles for Jewish Messianic expectation to spread to areas of Northwestern India where Mahayana was later developed.

Furthermore, the area continued to be in one unified kingdom under the reign of the Greek kings. Alexander the Great, the first Greek Emperor, even campaigned beyond the Indus river, where the legend was told that he wept because there were no more worlds to conquer. After Alexander's death, the empire was divided among his generals. Two of these, whose dynasties were to have lasting importance for Palestinian affairs, were Ptolemy and Seleucus. It was Ptolemy II who ordered the translation of the Old Testament into Greek. This is known as the Septuagint. The translation was completed early in the third century BC. Although the Eastern part of the land was under the reign of Seleucus, the Greek language was used in the entire Greek empire. And in 198 BC, the Seleucids gained control of Palestine from Ptolemy V. Of course the communication between East and West became more possible. In addition, with the rise of the Messianic expectation during the time of

the Maccabees, the belief could have been pushed even further East.

Mythical Amida or Amitabha, the objective figure of devotion of Mahayana Buddhism, could have foreshadowed Christ Jesus, whom the Isralites awaited, through whom we are saved by grace though faith.²⁶ It is in Christ, not in Amida, that we can find the fulfillment of the prophecy of the Suffering Servant, who not only pointed out the problem of humankind, but also bears human suffering and can give the refugees abundant life without their giving up the desire to live meaningfully.²⁷ The historical Siddhartha remains important for the salvation of the Vietnamese Buddhists, as he affirmed the human predicament and revealed the impossibility of human effort, but the Vietnamese Buddhists need the Gospel of Jesus in their time of crisis.

Refugee reflection on Exilic experience

It was in the context of the exile that the image of the Suffering Servant emerged. The Vietnamese experience of life as refugees would find, in the exilic experience in Jewish history, a norm for life here and now and the hope for the future, if this event could be retold for them. Although the Israelites and the Vietnamese were carried away by different agents (the Isralites by the enemies and the Vietnamese by friends) there are some similarities between the two exiled groups. Their tragedies were caused by

injustice; both cried over the ruin of their countries; both remembered the good old days in their homelands; both were given some privileges in foreign lands; and both expected that they would someday return to their homes.

Jeremiah knew two reasons for the fall of Judah: (1) Israel turned against God and worshipped man-made idols, "They have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water" (Jeremiah 2:13 NAS). (2) They not only sinned but they were so deep in sin that they could not realize their condition. "Although you wash yourself with lye and use much soap, the stain of your iniquity is before me, declares the Lord God" (Jeremiah 2:22 NAS). To symbolize the uncleanable sins, Jeremiah used the images of a young restive camel straying away from the herd, and a wild ass in heat, to show that Israel was so saturated by sin that the Israelites could not restrain themselves, (Jeremiah 8:5-7).

In a situation like this, only a punishment beyond imagination could make them stop and think again. It is beyond imagination that the Babylonians took over Jerusalem, so Habakkuk said to God, "Thine eyes are too pure to approve evil, and Thou canst not look on wickedness with favor. Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow-up those more righteous than they?" (Habakkuk 1:12 NSA). Exile was the judgment of God on His people's sin. It was necessary in

order to save them from total destruction.

The socio-economic situation in Vietnam was at its worst in 1974-1975. There was corruption at all levels of Government. Government positions could be bought and sold. High ranking officers of the government as well as of the army, and a few rich persons enjoyed luxurious living, parties night after night at the expense of millions of poor soldiers and civilians. Justice was out of reach: money was the decisive element in the verdicts. All were victims as well as victimizers.³⁰ Everybody thought that Saigon could never fall. We lived in the illusions that we had a strong army (in reality thousands of soldiers did not have shoes, the number of deserters increased), that we loved our country enough to protect it from the Communist threat, and that the allied countries could never abandon us, because Vietnam is the stronghold of Southeast Asia.³¹ The fall of South Vietnam was really beyond imagination.

The book of Jeremiah shows that, in the period leading up to the exile, the judgment of God had to do, not with a failure of God's love, but with a failure of justice, humility and faithfulness on the part of God's people. Judgment was initiated not by God, but by sin against God. God's judgment did not negate God's love but made renewal and hope possible.³² The great prophets had paved the way for the new expression of Israel's faith by insisting that Yahweh was not bound to the temple of Jerusalem. In Jeremiah's letter

to the exiles, he insisted that even in a faraway land, where there was no Yahweh temple, the people could have access to God through prayer (Jeremiah 29:12-14). Ezekiel beheld the vision of Yahweh's coming upon his throne to his people in exile, just as the ancient ark had moved from place to place during the wanderings of Israel (Ezekiel 1). In the exile, the people realized that they could turn to God anywhere with the confidence that he would be near, and that he would be their sanctuary in a foreign land (Ezekiel 11:16).

Undoubtedly, a number of prayers were composed during this period, e.g. Psalm 137. Moreover, during this period the Jews undoubtedly came together in small groups, after the manner of the elders who consulted Ezekiel in his house, to be instructed in their spiritual traditions and to worship informally. It has been suggested that the synagogue, the "gathering together" for worship and teaching, may have originated during the Exile.³³

The Vietnamese experience of the exile began when all the chaos happened. Millions of people had to "pass through the waters" or "walk through the fire" to find life.³⁴ Bao Quoc Tran, the young composer whom we have mentioned in Chapter III (the lyric of his song, "The song on the way to exile", is similar to Psalm 137), is the only son of a well known Buddhist palm reader. On his way to exile, he despondently asked for God's help when his boat sank in the sea, and he was of only few survivors on that boat.

Acknowledging the salvation of God, he began his new series, "Sing for the Lord". One of the songs in this series is "Prayer of repentance", the lyric is as follows::

Oh Lord, hear my prayer !
 Oh Lord, please hear my prayer, the words of the
 sorrowful repentance.
 This is my tear from the uttermost of my broken heart.
 My soul is so bitter and my tears fall unceasingly.
 This is my broken heart with all the sorrows surrounding
 my life. I went away as the prodigal son in the
 endless night.
 I spent so many days in the darkness of a sinful life.
 I fell as a leaf whirls in a stormy wind.
 I offer my repentant heart to you, Father, in unuttered
 sobs.
 I pray that my loving Father miraculously clean my sins.
 Like a lost sheep without a shepherd, wandering like a
 boat without destination and wishing to escape
 from the sinful life.
 Like a prodigal son returning home and the loving Father
 is still long waiting. Although years pass by which
 are filled with rains and storms, the love of God
 never fade.
 When I walk through the stormy and dangerous life. I
 pray that you will give me strength to overcome and
 that my feeble soul will sail over the sinful sea of
 life that my soul will be hid in you my everlasting
 Father. 35

The life of refuge is also a time to build. In the letter to the Jews in captivity, Jeremiah advised them:

Build houses and live in them, and plant gardens, and
 eat their produce. Take wives and become the fathers
 of sons and daughters, and take wives for your sons and
 give your daughters to husbands, that they may bear sons
 and daughters; and multiply there and do not decrease.
 And seek the welfare of the city where I (the Lord) have
 sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf;
 for in its welfare you will have welfare (Jeremiah 29:5-
 7 NAS)

If exile was a judgment of God against injustice,
 this was the time for the Israelites to repent and learn to
 build for the future. In this letter Jeremiah says in effect,

three things. First, this will be a long exile, the Israelites can not expect a quick return: this exile will last even until their grandchildren. Although the return is far away, there will be such a day. They should use this time to prepare for that day. They should live and eat well, and learn to deal with the present situation. Second, not only should they be alive to see the return, but they should prepare for the return so that they will be ready to rebuild the country, "Multiply there, do not decrease."

Multiplication is a sign of prosperity and strength, and it is a necessity for the rebuilding of the nation. Third, if they want to live and eat well and build a strong community of Jews in Babylon, they should remember that their welfare is affected by the welfare of the whole city, and vice versa. They need to care for others, and think beyond their own interest. They are called to a higher morality, because, when they return, they will rebuild the temple of a God who hears prayers even for their enemies, and blesses them. If they want to build a nation with justice, they should start it now, where they are.

It is clear that the message of Jeremiah contains the element of hope for a return. He bought land at Anathoth to prove his faith in God for this return. He even predicted that the exile would last for seventy years (Jeremiah 29, 32:6-15). In contrast to the time of the exodus, the exiles will return in peace "but you will not go out in haste, nor

will you go as fugitives; for the Lord will go before you, and the God of Israel will be your rear guard" (Isaiah 52:12 NAS).

In 538 B.C. the Babylonia kingdom, which had captured and destroyed Jerusalem, fell into the hands of Cyrus, king of Persia. A year later he gave permission for the reconstruction of the temple and, to that end, made restitution of the temple-vessels pillaged by Nebuchadnezzar. Judea did not, thereby, have its political independence restored; rather, Jerusalem was to be a temple-city, situated in a strategically important place, subject to and under the direct control of the Persian king. Some time later, probably shortly before 520 B.C., a large number of exiles, (Ezra 2 claimed about 50,000), returned to Jerusalem. They were resolved to make a fresh start on the basis of their repentance.³⁶

It is the desire of all Vietnamese refugees, Christian and Buddhist alike, that some day they can return to Vietnam. Can this desire become a hope? The reason of hope of the Israelites' return was that they could not "sing the Lord's song in a foreign land", what is ours? Can this hope keep us alive -- mold and shape us properly for the rebuilding of our nation?

It is in the Judeo-Christian, but not in Indian and Buddhist tradition, that we can best reflect on our lives as refugees in the foreign land. It is in this exilic

experience that we can find hope of a return, a hope which can effect the lives of refugees here and there, now and then. Only in this Judeo-Christian experience, can hope become a reality. In the fullness of time, God's son became flesh, to be the Suffering Servant, to bear the sin of the world, and to bring about the Kingdom of God, in which "there will be no longer any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away."

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Cobb., p. 132
- 17
C.S. Song, The Compassionate God (New York: Orbis Books, 1982) p. 174
- 18
Ibid., pp. 51,62
- 19
Ibid., p.69
- 20
Ibid., p.162
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Francis M. Seely "Thai Buddhism and the Christian Faith", Southeast Asian Journal of Theology 10 (October - January 1968) 137
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John A. Hutchinson, Path of Faith (NewYork: McGraw-Hill Book, 1981) p. 280
- 23
John Bright, A History of Israel (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) p. 359ff.
- 24
Ibid., p. 416
- 25
Donald J. Selby, Introduction to the New Testament (New York: Macmillan, 1971) p. 5
- 26
Cobb, p. 140

27

Ibid., p.80. According to the Buddhist teaching, to cease the suffering one has to stop cleaving even to Buddha or Nirvana. Cobb mentioned a famous Buddhist saying to the effect "If you meet Buddha, Kill him"

28

Ralph W. Klein, Israel in Exile (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979) p. 51. Also see U.S. Senate Committee on the Juriciary, Aftermath of War: Humanitarian Problems of Southeast Asia (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1976) pp. 270-501

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George C. Herring, America's longest War (New York: Wiley, 1979) pp. 43-72

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Bruce Birch, Singing the Lord's Song (Columbus: General Board of Global Ministries, 1981) p. 18

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Scott C.S. Stone and John E. McCowan, Wrapped in the Wind's Shawl (San Rafael: Presidio Press, 1980) pp. 35-38

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Bao Quoc Tran, Hat Tren Duong Luu Vong (Westminster: V.C.P. Printing, 1981) p. 25

36

Werneer Foerster, From the Exile to Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1964) p.14

Chapter VI

PROPOSED WAYS OF EVANGELIZATION

In the previous chapters, I have already mentioned that between 95 and 98 percent of the Vietnamese Buddhist refugees don't know the Four Noble Truth and the Eightfold Path. They are just Buddhists by tradition. In my experience as a pastor to the refugees and in my interviews with several new converts to Christianity from Buddhism, I have found none who have a good understanding of Buddhism, although many of them were very devoted. I have also found out that those who know Buddhism well have a higher degree of tolerance toward Christianity, although they are less likely to be converted. This is congruent with John Cobb's statement that the Buddhist societies tend to be more tolerant of other religion.¹ At any rate, it is our responsibility as Christians to announce the Good News and, if possible, to convert Buddhists at all levels of understanding.

Dialogue

I would like to start with the evangelization of those Buddhists with a good knowledge of Buddhism. Although the number is small, they are very important to Buddhism as a religion. I agree with John Cobb that we can't evangelize by reciting set formulae. Instead, we need

to be ready to enter into a dialogue.² Dialogue becomes a token of Christian humility and love, because it indicates our resolve to rid our minds of the prejudices and caricatures we may have about other people. In dialogue we pay attention to what prevents the Buddhists from hearing the Gospel and seeing Christ. We sympathize with them in all their doubts and fears and "hang-ups".³ The CWME Conference in Mexico City in 1963 has laid out these guidelines for dialogue:

True dialogue with a man of another faith requires a concern both for the Gospel and for the other man. Without the first, dialogue becomes a pleasant conversation. Without the second, it becomes irrelevant unconvincing, or arrogant.⁴

Dialogue requires a freedom of give and take between two persons. The Vietnamese Christians have learned the wrong method of evangelization. We have presented the Gospel like a salesman who blatantly talks and talks; he is afraid that the customer may find out the defect in his product. We need to transform ourselves as we hear the Buddhist truth. The fact that the Buddhist societies are more moral, more pacific than those of the Christian faith, is what we should humbly acknowledge and learn from our Buddhist friends.⁵ We need not be ashamed to share the saving power of Jesus Christ, whom, as we have mentioned, the Buddhist refugees need the most in their time of crisis. Moreover, we need to be more concerned about the conversion of Buddhism,⁶ especially in the case of Mahayana. This, I believe, can be

done only through dialogue with the Buddhist intellectuals. Vietnamese tradition gives the highest respect to scholars: "Si, Nong, Cong, Thuong" (The scholar is first, second is the farmer, third is the government official, and the last is the businessman). To that end, the Vietnamese Christian Church, as a whole, needs to prepare a working agenda for the task of evangelization of Buddhists at the intellectual level. This should include:

(1) Educate Christians on Buddhism. Vietnamese Christians have been misinformed about Buddhism. Some even rudely claim that Buddhism is not what it really intends to be. When we know more about Buddhism, we can get rid of our "Buddhism-Phobia" and freely enter into dialogue.

(2) Invite Buddhist scholars to some Christian Conferences. Let them have opportunities to present their beliefs, so that we have chances to reflect. First of all, we should listen with humility to what they share. We should be open to the truth that can transform us, and, in turn, let the Gospel transform them or Buddhism. This honesty can be the key to open the temple door for Jesus Christ.

(3) Join with Buddhists in some humanitarian and moral projects that can bring us close together in friendship and help the Buddhists get rid of the "Christianity-Phobia" which some of them may have. This will facilitate a favorable mood for evangelization.

(4) Provide a continuing opportunity for dialogue.

Periodicals or magazines, would serve both Christian and Buddhist scholars to express their views. This will be a pilot project for the transformation of both religions in the future.

Infiltration

We often hear the missionaries use the expression: "Confront him (or her) with the Gospel". This confrontation attitude, I believe, has come from the imperialistic mentality of the West. Going from door to door, meeting people on the street and presenting a set of formulae that are believed to have some kind of magic power, is absurd. "Suppose you were to die tonight" is more or less offensive to the Vietnamese. They tend to resist this kind of confrontation. Fighting the Chinese to the end even though it took us a thousand years, ousting the French, even though that required a hundred years, and the final victory of the Vietnamese Communists who used guerrilla tactic for thirty years against South Vietnam and its allied forces (although the victory proved to be a disaster), are examples of that kind of resistance.

It is by infiltration, not confrontation, that we can evangelize the Vietnamese refugees, as well as the Vietnamese in Vietnam. C.S. Song mentioned the same subtle method that helped the spread of Buddhism in China:

Through Koyi, the method of extension, the Buddhist faith extended itself into Chinese religious and

philosophical thought. It penetrated into Chinese spirituality. And this is not a one-way traffic. In turn the Buddhist faith was penetrated by Chinese thought. Chinese ideas and beliefs extended themselves into Buddhism. 7

The Chinese and Vietnamese always praise any subtler methods. The principle of "nhu thang cuong" (Softness wins hardness), which permeates all aspects of life of the Vietnamese, not only expresses itself in the tactics of warfare and martial-arts, but also reveals the tendency to shun head-on confrontation.

The presence of the legendary Lady Buddhas, such as "The Lady Buddha Quan Am" (Phat Bà Quan Am), "The Lady Buddha Linh-Son Thanh Mau", or "Barbarian Lady" (man Nuong), is characteristic of Vietnamese Buddhism. These lady Buddhas, we are told, disciples of and in submission to their male masters, are worshipped -- not the male figures. It is to those lady Buddhas that the average Vietnamese Buddhists give prayers when they go through dangerous times (See Appendix A and B). Probably the closeness, warmth, and subtleness of a female figure make people feel more secure and protected. In Vietnamese culture songs, poems and novels praise motherhood more often than any other family relationships. Even though the father plays the predominant role in the family, it is the mother who is more powerful and influential. There are songs, poems and novels praising solely the mother, but this is not the case with the father. It is for that reason that I contend that Catholicism is more

successful than Protestantism. The presence of the Virgin Mary in their system of belief enables Catholicism to meet the needs of the Vietnamese. In an effort to disassociate with Mariology the Vietnamese Protestants have been over-zealous and subconsciously neglect also the feminine aspect in Christianity, an element that is very appealing to the common people.

I propose that, in the evangelization of the Vietnamese Buddhist refugees, we need to infiltrate into their minds and hearts with the Gospel. Confrontation is not desirable, in any form, and must be considered unwise. This is especially true with poorly educated Buddhists, who respond more to their feelings than to reason. Confrontation hurts their feelings. We have sometimes heard the disappointment of those Buddhists who were sponsored by some Christian churches. The pressure that those churches imposed upon them, that if they don't go to church they won't get help, caused them to be angry and resentful of the Gospel.

Dialogue with those who have little understanding of Buddhism is very subtle, too. It is so easy for them to have the feeling that we try to out-smart them by trying to teach them what Buddhists actually believe. So I think that Dialogue, in this sense, would be undesirable.

Hospitality

Hospitality is a Christian virtue. Unfortunately,

with the fear and anxiety growing in our society, we are often afraid of receiving strangers into our homes and into our churches. There is a growing number of people who are homeless, strangers in our Vietnamese community. They need someone who cares and accepts them. There have been failures and disappointments in the past that have weakened our zeal for hospitality. There is no other way that people can, not only hear, but also see the Gospel and come to long for that kind of Good News. "It is a risky type of evangelization",⁸ as Mortimer Arias said, but that is the witness, the martyr, that our Lord has commissioned us to be.

Celebration

One of the distinctive marks of the early Christian community was their life together around the table -- the sharing of the Agape meal and the Lord's Supper. Acts 2:4 says: "day by day, attending the temple together and breaking the bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved". We don't really know how many had become Christians because of preaching, but we do know that there were people regularly added to the Christian community through Christian celebrations in the small groups. The Vietnamese refugees living in the United States need a place to celebrate their lives together. And the church is the

only place that can provide that place. Why don't we
incorporate them into our Christian community in this way?
The church needs to maintain small groups, because this is
the only way the Buddhists feel welcome and invited to share
their life with their Christian friends.⁹

NOTES

- 1
John Cobb, Jr., Beyond Dialogue (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1982) p. 132
- 2
Ibid., p. 141
- 3
John R.W. Stott "The Biblical Basis of Evangelism", in Mission Trends No.2 (New York: Paulist Press, 1975) p. 9
- 4
Ibid., p. 14
- 5
Cobb, p. 132
- 6
Ibid., p. 142
- 7
C.S. Song, The Compassionate God (New York: Orbis Books, 1982) p. 178
- 8
Mortimer Arias "Centripetal Mission or Evangelization by Hospitality" Missiology: An International Review 10:1 (January 1982) 14
- 9
Paul Yonggi Cho, Successful Home cell groups (Plainfield: Logos International, 1981) pp. 49ff

Chapter VII

CONCLUSION

There have been almost 30 years of Protestantism in Vietnam and 9 years of mission to the refugees. The number of Protestant Christians is very small (about 1/200 of the population). This is not because the Vietnamese refugees don't need the Gospel, but because we have not evangelized properly. As we have shown the refugees are still deeply hurt. They have no future, no hope to go on. They are still longing for the return to their native land. Only faith in God who once saved and brought life back to the people of Israel in similar conditions can give them salvation. That God is also the God of the universe, the God of all nations, as declared by the Bible. And if today, we pay heed to history, even the salvation history, we will not repeat the past mistakes and be ready to undertake the evangelistic work that God has called us to do. The solution to the life problems of the suffering refugees is there and the charge that Jesus gave to the Church in the last commandment (Matt. 28:18-20) leaves us no alternative to bringing the truly Good News to those that He once came to save.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

THE STORY OF THE LADY BUDDHA QUAN AM

There are two stories about The Lady Buddha Quan Am who is very popular among the Vietnamese. One is the story of Nam Hai Quan Am, and the other is the Quan Am Thi Kinh drama.

Nam Hai Quan Am was written by a Chinese monk and spread into Vietnam about the 14th-15th century. The story went like this: Once upon a time, there was a Tibetan king whose name was Dieu Trang. Although he was old, he had no son to succeed to him. Therefore, he came to Tay Nhac De temple to pray. His earnest prayer touched god, but he had three daughters instead of a son. They were the reincarnated sons of a very kind family, Thi. He named them Dieu Thanh, Dieu Am and Dieu Thien, who was also called the Third Princess. Dieu-Thien soon became a devout Buddhist. She refused to obey her father's instruction to get married. Instead, she left home and chose a monastic life in the temple. The king was very angry; so he imprisoned her. Her faith was very stable. The angrier the king became, the more he tried to find ways to persuade and press her, but his efforts could not change her mind.

At last, the king ordered the temple to be burnt down. Dieu Thien prayed to god, and a dragon came down with water to quench the fire. Dieu Thien was condemned to be executed, but the sword was broken just as it touched her

neck. Lightning came up, and a tiger suddenly jumped over and snatched her away. It was told that when she died, her soul went through 18 doors of hell. As she saw the sinners were painfully punished, her heart was touched, and she prayed to god and got the power to liberate those imprisoned souls. The king of hell respected her very highly.

Then her soul came back to the world, reincarnated at the land of Giao Chau (Ancient Vietnam). There, she decided to meditate. Buddha appeared as a handsome young man to try her the for last time, but she remained faithful. Then the Buddha revealed himself and showed her the way to Huong Tich temple, where she later became a Lady Buddha Quan Am.

One day, her father fell seriously ill. He looked for a doctor and promised that he would forfeit his throne to someone who could heal him, but all well-known doctors were helpless. Dieu Thien appeared as a doctor and asked to see the king. After diagnosing, she said, "The king only needs the eye and the hand of the kind lady who is meditating at Huong Tich Temple to be cured." The king asked the doctor to remain in the palace, and sent his men to Huong Tich temple as he was told. The Lady Buddha was so kind as to sacrifice herself to save humankind. With the eye and hand of the Lady, the king was healed. Just as he decided to give up his throne, the doctor disappeared. Thanks to her magic power, she had been able to save her father. When she reappeared, she had her eye and hand again.

After that, the king found himself and was thankful for the Buddhism that had save his life. Until the king was saved, he didn't know that his daughter had achieved Buddhahood and that she had magic power to fulfill the responsibilities of a child to her parents and family, and of a citizen to her country. The king and his entire family met at Huong Tich temple, and all became Buddhists.

Translated from Thich Bao Lac,
Kien Thuc Ban Ban Phat-Giao
 (Sepulveda: Phat Hoc Vien Quoc-Te,
 1982), p.331

The Quan Am Thi Kinh drama was very popular among the low class Vietnamese. The story went like this:

Thi Kinh was a daughter of a middle class family. She was beautiful and virtuous. She married Thien Si, son of a noble family, and they were very happy together. One day, an incident happened like this: Thi Kinh was busy sewing while Thien Si was sleeping. She happened to see that one hair grew up-side down on his chin; so she took a knife, intending to cut it off. Just as the knife came close to his neck, Thien Si woke up. Wrongly supposing that his wife was trying to kill him, he yelled out loud.

Thi Kinh was considered a husband murderer, and she was returned to her parents. Having no chance to plead for herself, Thi Kinh decided to become a nun. To cover up her identity, she dressed like a man and came to Van Tu temple to ask for permission to enter the monastic life. Later on, a

girl named Thi Mau from a rich family fell in love with Kinh Tam (Thi Kinh's new name) for she thought that Kinh Tam was a man. This girl was already pregnant with someone else, but she claimed that she had an affair with Kinh Tam. The people in the village prosecuted and punished Kinh Tam, but she refused to reveal her identity. The master of the temple was touched by Kinh Tam's endurance and asked the villagers not to punish him any longer.

After the baby was born, Thi Mau abandoned him in front of the temple. Kinh Tam brought him into the temple and nurtured him, in spite of the opposition of the master. Kinh Tam died when the baby was three years old. Before she died, she sent a letter to her parents to reveal the whole story.

After Kinh Tam died, the true story was known. Thanks to the miracle of Buddha, Thi Kinh could endure the misunderstanding of the people. The villagers asked Thi Mau to mourn for her and pay all funeral expenses.

Her parents, her husband and his family immediately came to mourn her. Everyone saw the Buddha appear to order Kinh Tam's parents and the baby to come to the lotus palace. Thien Si turned into a parrot flying around the Lady Buddha.

Thanks to the miraculous power of Buddha, Kinh Tam enter Nirvana and became The Lady Buddha Quan Am.

Translated from Thich Bao Lac
Kien Thuc Can Ban Phat Giao ,
 (Sepulveda: Phat Hoc Vien Quoc
 Te), p. 403

APPENDIX B

THE STORY OF THE LADY BUDDHA LINH SON THANH MAU

It is told that when Tay-Ninh was still a part of Cambodia, there was a Cambodian district officer who had two children: a boy and a girl named Nang Denh.

When Nang Denh was about 13 years old a Chinese monk came from Ben Cat to look for a temple where he could teach Buddhism. The officer asked him to stay in his house to begin his teaching.

Although she was very young, Nang Denh was interested in learning. The officer was very committed to Buddhism so he built for the Chinese monk a temple which was known as the Chinese Man Temple.

Nang Denh continued to be faithful to Buddhism even after the monk had left. When she reached the age for marriage, her parents decided she should marry the son of Trang Bang's mayor. She had already decided to become a nun.

After several nights of thinking, she left home searching for salvation in the Buddhist way, without the knowledge of her parents.

When her parents discovered the disappearance of their daughter, they sent soldiers to look everywhere. Finally, they found a piece of her leg in a cave in the mountain.

The people in the area believe that since she died unexpectedly, she would become very spiritual. Therefore, in times of trouble, they pray to her.

Translated from Toan Anh, Hoi He Dinh Dam
(Saigon: Nam Chi Tung Thu, 1969) p. 196

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